

Thundercrack (Curt McDowell, 1975) is a hard core porn film with scenes of explicit sexual activity. It uses a trash style that undercuts most people's usual responses to porn. For example, it depicts a basically silly scene of male masturbation by machine which is not calculated to turn on very many porn viewers. It presents a blow job in an intentionally anti-climactic way by punctuating it with a singularly banal discussion. McDowell and his scriptwriter George Kuchar are the perfect collaborative pair for this camp pastiche of cinematic conventions. With a stock-in-trade vulgarity of gargantuan proportions, they feel free to push their excesses to an epic length of two and one-half hours. While the basic story line seems simple enough--the old chestnut that brings together a group of strangers who must then relate to each other and some outside danger (**Stagecoach**, **Night of the Living Dead**, **Dirty Dozen**)--the film's main interest lies in depicting the constantly changing burlesques and travesties of cultural conventions from the cinematic and real worlds. Thus the actor's set piece, Recital of a Gruesome Incident, becomes in **Thundercrack** a bizarre story about how a woman ignited her girdle at a garden party to demonstrate her freedom, only to be burned by her garment's lethal chemistry. First horrified, the guests finally accidentally join in immolating her when the alcohol in their drinks feeds the fire instead of putting it out. The victim becomes a martyr for the women's movement and the inspiration for a terrorist attack on the House of Philips girdle company, which had exhibited a typical capitalist disregard for human life by making the incendiary underwear.

The film continues in this vein, mixing shaggy dog stories, Grand Guignol, clichés of cheap magazine fiction, nonsequiturs, parodies of reborn Christians, moments of soap opera drama, and hard core pornography. **Thundercrack** has just enough satire to construct a plausible case for redeeming social value, as in the sendup of Buckminster Fuller devotees: "Here on Spaceship Earth there are no scum, just malfunctioning circuits." But any sustained attempt to justify the film on such grounds would run into the problem of the film's relentless absurdity. Can we take anything in it seriously?

I think the film does provide one anchoring reference point in the last sexual escapade. Justifying giving in to sexual blackmail, one character explains, "No greater love can a man show for a woman than to give his body to the enemy." This is the verbal defense of the one sex scene which is presented straight (well it is a gay love scene, but without

mocking). The intercourse between two men is filmed and presented as ordinary porn with an emotionally synchronized soundtrack (drum and flute) and routine climax. This scene, as opposed to all the other sexual encounters, is privileged: it intends to be erotic.

In this way the film actually does get beyond the running gags on impotence, masturbation, voyeurism, enemas, incest and interspecies sex (in Kuchar's long monologue about his ill-fated love affair with a homicidal female gorilla). The women in the film are not women but drag queens who happen to have the biological definition of female. In one sense, then, the film is an extended gay male mocking of heterosexuality: physically, when one man begins fucking an inflatable female doll; verbally, when both male and female characters abuse men who become impotent when faced with an open invitation to heterosexual pleasure. In this sense, the whole film stands as a double entendre: one that can only be fully understood within the context of gay male subculture.